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Next 1 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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11 February 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : ONE Memorandum on the Problem of a Sino-Soviet War

1. Recently, ONE prepared a memorandum, "Sino-Soviet Relations and the Question of Hostilities," for Admiral Anderson of the PFIAB. The final version of this paper was substantially improved over an earlier effort, and we are in agreement with the principal conclusion expressed in the last three paragraphs--that the present Soviet leadership under present circumstances will not take drastic military action against China. Nevertheless, the tendentious path taken to reach this conclusion deserves comment.

2. One glaring problem with the paper is its pre-occupation with the events of the summer of 1969 and its slighting of subsequent developments. Tensions clearly reached a peak following the border clashes that year. Nevertheless, the Soviet decision to press for and stick with the border talks and to seek a "normalization" of relations, while continuing the military build-up, signaled an intent to ride out the current difficulties and to hope for the future. Indeed, their success in facing down the Chinese in 1969 and bringing about an easing of tensions in 1970, appears to have given the Soviets a greater confidence in the correctness of this course.

3. In its discussion of the Soviet assessment of the Chinese threat, the paper seems slanted to overemphasize Soviet anxiety. Certainly Moscow is apprehensive about the implications of Chinese nuclear and missile progress. Nevertheless, the thrust of current Soviet thinking seems to reflect a more realistic assessment of Chinese capabilities than that presented in the ONE paper.

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Militarily, the Chinese are very poorly trained so the question of military confrontation is not of primary concern to the USSR. We have supreme confidence that the armed forces of the USSR could handle such a military confrontation without difficulty.

5. It would be idle to belabor differences with the discussion in paragraphs 13-16 regarding interpretation of developments in the summer of 1969. These were amply stated in the discussion of the draft. It is still difficult to accept that the Soviets were seriously entertaining the establishment of "buffer states" (which would require endless defense against an even more revanchist and hostile China) or were weighing a large ground attack in order to install a "pro-Soviet" regime in Peking. Furthermore, it is doubtful that a conventional air strike against Chinese advanced weapons installations would do the job. Finally, in discussing the indicators of Soviet intentions

-2-

Approved For Release 2005/08/24 : CIA-RDP79R00967A001500010006-9

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during that period, it should be borne in mind that we never saw signs of the major military reinforcements needed to bring Soviet military units along the border up to full combat strength.

6. Finally, it would be well to add a proviso to the conclusions, to the effect that a recurrence of serious border clashes could lead to the suspension of all bets. In that situation, the Soviets might consider a substantial punitive raid to impress on the Chinese the folly of their course. If such a development were to come to pass, it would carry with it the possibility of inadvertent escalation. Indeed, it might be just such a process of blind stumbling that would be the most likely scenario for the outbreak of Sino-Soviet hostilities.

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Chief, European Division, OCI

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